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THE ORIGIN AND MEANING OF GREEK HERO CULTS

Heretofore the Greek hero cults have lacked adequate treatment in modern literature, but this defect is now made good by the publication of Farnell's Gifford Lectures for the year 1920.¹ Readers familiar with this scholar's previous work will readily appreciate the worth of his new book when they observe that it is essentially a continuation and supplement of his five monumental volumes on the *Cults of the Greek States*. On the basis of a careful sifting and classification of all available sources of information he now presents a detailed interpretation of Greek worship of the deceased human person and the closely related notions about the state in which the dead dwell and the possibility of a blessed immortality for the individual.

An examination of pre-Homeric tradition yields only scanty results, which are found however to indicate that at the very dawn of Greek history sacrifices to ghosts were not unknown and divine or semi-divine honors were ascribed to human beings. In later times a well-defined group of heroes and heroines—the "hieratic" type—were in the main objects of worship before later mythological fancy pictured them in human garb. Originally they were spirits of vegetation and agriculture personifying the physical life of the earth and the power manifested in the changing seasons. But in the case of most figures of heroic fame exactly the opposite process of thinking operated to bestow divine honors upon individuals, historical or mythical, originally portrayed as strictly human personalities. Such for example was true of certain men and women revered for their activity in establishing religious rites or in discharging priestly duties. A similar conclusion regarding the priority of the human figure is reached with reference to those numerous individuals of heroic legend, of whom Herakles, the Dioskouroi, and Asklepios are outstanding representatives. Also the great epic heroes (e.g., Achilles, Agamemnon, Diomedes) about whom vigorous cults flourished prove to have been, either in fact or at least in the predominant opinion of their devotees, originally illustrious human personages rather than anthropomorphized divinities.

Our author thinks, and apparently rightly, that the genesis of hero cults is not to be sought in the cult of ancestors, nor is the reverse process of religious evolution to be affirmed. These two cult interests develop simultaneously, although they not unnaturally influence each other. The attitude toward ancestral spirits may be one of fear or one of

¹ *Greek Hero Cults and Ideas of Immortality*. By Lewis Richard Farnell. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921. xvi+434 pages.

affection, but in the post-Mycenaean period of Greek history fear of the dead predominates, and a disposition toward the worship of the deceased increases correspondingly. Thus the posthumous worship by the Greeks of persons whose actual humanity and historicity are never open to question emerges, not as a sudden aberration or decadence of the Greek spirit, but as a normal stage in the evolution of religious history. It is in fact only a short step to the apotheosis of living persons who, like the illustrious Alexander, during their own lifetime inspire their contemporaries with awe or admiration.

The phenomena thus far observed are believed to be genuinely Hellenic in character. But a further examination of the belief in individual immortality reveals a new and more powerful stimulus derived originally from a foreign source, viz., the Thrako-Phrygian mysteries of Dionysos-Bacchos and the theology of Orphism. Although the deified Hellenic hero was immortal, it was only occasionally, as in the case of Herakles for instance, that his own apotheosis furnished his worshipers any hope of a blessed hereafter. On the other hand, it was mainly from the mysteries that Greek religion derived its striking doctrine of individual immortality. To be sure this was a conspicuous item in the genuinely Greek mysteries of Eleusis, but the Eleusinian hope rested simply upon a vision of certain holy objects exhibited to the initiate rather than upon any experience of mystical union with the saving deity. Our author thinks the imported Bacchic-Orphic sects are the source of the conviction that the worshiper may by participation in the sacred rites secure so real a fusion of the deity with his own mortal substance that henceforth the soul of the devotee becomes itself essentially divine. In the attainment of this conviction the hope of immortality reached the climax of its development on Greek soil in pre-Christian times. It is in Orphism also that the strict immateriality of the soul is first stressed, and Orphic teaching regarding the possibility of the soul's ultimate escape from matter becomes a veritable doctrine of salvation.

In several respects these lectures are unusually significant. Their author recognizes the importance of social and anthropological considerations for an understanding of mythology, and consequently he avoids the pitfalls of the once popular philological school. Particularly valuable are his criticisms of the polydaemonistic theory, as expounded in Usener's *Götternamen*, to explain the origin of the Greek gods. After all, apparently Euhemerus was nearer to the truth than has been commonly supposed. Also a timely warning is raised against a too rigid predisposition prevalent in some quarters today to make cult the uniform precursor and

source of all myths. A study of the worship of heroes also bears very directly upon the subject of emperor worship especially in the eastern Mediterranean world of early Christian times. If heroes are in the main originally men, whether real or imaginary, exalted to the status of deities, rather than anthropomorphized divinities, the inclination of the Hellenistic East to revere as god a general or an emperor who restored a shattered society to a new condition of safety might have rested upon a more truly religious basis than is often imagined.

This volume contains much that is of especial interest to the historian of Christianity. Since belief in a deified hero and the hope of individual immortality were widely current in the gentile world prior to the rise of Christianity, any thoroughgoing investigation of the genesis and content of Christian thinking along these lines should obviously concern itself not a little with gentile antecedents. Such preparatory work might simplify many problems. In the early centuries of its history the new religion was disturbed by christological controversies involving the question as to whether Christ was primarily a man-god or a god-man. And the debate of more recent times regarding the historicity of Jesus ultimately resolves itself into a choice between the same two alternatives. Farnell does not turn aside to discuss these specifically Christian issues, but everyone who would approach them from the point of view of the ancients should become familiar with the content and functional significance of the Greek hero cults. Or, again, readers of the gospels when acquainted with the heritage bequeathed to the Graeco-Roman world through the worship of heroes will more easily understand why the evangelists, writing in the language of the Gentiles and undoubtedly in the interests of the gentile mission, chose to emphasize so strikingly the heroic elements in their accounts of the life of Jesus. It is hardly possible to appreciate truly their interest in the marvelous without remembering that they were appealing to an audience accustomed to admire devoutly a Herakles for his heroic deeds on behalf of mortals or an Asklepios for his wonderful works of healing.

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